

THE SEASIDE SET

What happens on the island, stays on the island," I'm advised by Gary, the twinkly barman, who's been shaking martinis at the Burgh Island Hotel for nearly 26 years. He's not talking about Vegas-style debauchery, but a discreet playfulness. Perhaps it's something to do with being marooned 800ft off the Devon coast. When the tide's in, you arrive by sea tractor – like a growly festival float on chunky wheels, known as the "coastess trolley". When it broke down once, mid-crossing, Gary slipped into a wetsuit and served trays of tea and biscuits to the passengers as they waited for the water to recede. As the evening wears on, the sea tractor apparently becomes as raucous as a stag-do bus.

Built in the late 1920s, the hotel was originally the seaside "castle" of the film maker Archibald Nettlefold. Then it became a ritzy hotel, attracting the 1930s jet set. It went through a sad period when it was converted into holiday flats, but was brought back to life in the 1980s.

This year it's had a much-needed £1m makeover, overseen by the new owners. I've been invited to check out the refurb, and it's an excuse to plunder the dressing-up box. Back in the 1930s, the hotel had a glamorous reputation. Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson dropped in by yacht, Noël Coward was a regular, Nancy Cunard stayed and Agatha Christie worked on two of her novels here, *And Then There Were None* and *Evil Under the Sun*, which was later filmed on the island. Churchill and Eisenhower were rumoured to have played cards here during the Second World War. Little wonder Burgh Island became known as the "smartest hotel west of the Ritz".

It was almost derelict in the 1980s, when Tony Porter (who brought fashion week to London) purchased it with his wife, Beatrice. They no longer own it, but Porter's account of how they turned it around, *The Great White Palace*, is an insightful read. (The hotel has a copy.)

So, what's new? The public areas, including the central Palm Court, with its showstopping stained-glass dome, are gleaming. It's full of the whisper of parties past. Turquoise and red velvet armchairs have replaced the antique Lloyd Loom chairs and tables (they snagged guests' silk dresses) and the paintwork has been updated in deep teal and pale sage. Even on a grey day, it's lovely and light, with views across the terrace out to sea.

In the Nettlefold restaurant, where breakfast is served, you can imagine yourself on a liner – especially if you sit in the Captain's Cabin private dining area, which was transplanted in its entirety from the early-19th-century teak warship HMS Ganges. There are more changes to come.

Two glamorous coastal hotels with esteemed histories have had big-money makeovers. *Jenny Coad* glams up for Burgh Island; overleaf, a stay in Monaco's finest



GLASS ACT Martini time for Jenny in the Palm Court. Below, the 'coastess trolley' en route to the hotel

The Nettlefold will open as a public restaurant in May. There will be a bar by the pool and a spa is set to open in 2020. It's a drawn-out process because they have been running the changes past their long-standing guests.

You have to love the art deco aesthetic to stay here. Everything down to the doorknobs is deco. The rooms are so in keeping, they don't have televisions (though there is one in the basement snug). I am staying in the spruced-up Nettlefold suite, which feels old-fashioned, but that's the idea. There's period lighting and

vintage furniture: big tub chairs and a deco dressing table. The wallpaper is a geometric black and gold print. Newspaper pages full of society stories from the 1930s line the walls. There's even a Bush wireless and a Bakelite telephone, both of which work.

My two balconies face east, so in the morning I watch paddleboarders and surfers off distant Bantham Beach. Tea served in your room is all part of the service.



Which is civilised, although the dressing gown in my wardrobe looks how I feel first thing in the morning. It harks a little too literally back to a bygone era.

Bring a silk robe and get in the swing. Part of the fun of being here is the chance to dress up. A party from Jersey has arrived for a Gatsby-themed wedding. The gents are in tweed plus-fours and caps. The ladies have been "living" deco for months and have cases full of dresses.

Twin sisters have come from London with their partners to celebrate their 30ths; they used to holiday near here as children and longed to stay on Burgh. Dinner in the ballroom demands black tie, and they're in feather headbands and swish floor-length gowns. Has the hotel lived up to their expectations? "Being here is like playing make-believe," one tells me. Their rooms are a bit tired (it's a rolling renovation programme), and they wish there was a kettle, but this is not your typical high-end hotel experience – it is a dalliance with another time. Down more than one of Gary's martinis (try the lychee blush) and everything goes a bit sepia.

Dinner is elegant. I have a Brixham crab starter and an imaginative cod dish with Thai green curry and tempura broccoli. Non-hotel guests can pop over on the sea tractor for three courses, plus canapés, for £75. Dance off dessert to the Art Deco Trio, who've played this gig for years and take requests. The *Very Thought of You*, by Ray Noble, gets everyone going.

The following morning, I go for a wander around the island, stopping for a dip in the seawater Mermaid Pool, which sits in a cliff-enclosed cove. In the hazy morning light, I nearly manage to convince myself it will be warm. It's not. It's 10C.

I warm up afterwards at the 14th-century Pilchard Inn, also owned by the hotel and right by the sand. It's a former smugglers' den, allegedly haunted by the ghost of the pirate Tom Crocker, who was shot dead from the pub doorway. It's darkly atmospheric inside, serving pilchards on toast for £5.50 and fish and chips for £12.

As a hotel guest, you're beautifully placed for coastal walks and kayaking expeditions. But most don't venture far. They're too busy starring in their own period drama.

Jenny Coad was a guest of Burgh Island, which has doubles from £355 a night, including breakfast and dinner for two (burghisland.com)

